

The Essential Fairy Tale

*A discussion between playwright Astrid Saalbach
and dramaturgist Karen-Maria Bille*

A couple of years ago we invited you to write a play to mark the opening of the modernised StGerekasse theatre. But we said nothing about it featuring the royal family...

No, I am well aware of that. I wanted to look more closely at why we are so interested in the royal family. This was my sole personal basis for writing "Det kolde hjerte" (The Cold Heart). I was wondering what it is that preoccupies someone like myself, who is really neither for nor against the royal family. What is it that fascinates us? Even people who do not read the weeklies cannot help checking the headlines about the royal family. Why do people lay flowers when the old Queen dies? What kind of feelings does it trigger in us? They occupy a place somewhere in our awareness, and I wonder why.

In other words, what you want to find out has as much to do with the royal family as a function than with the actual royal family as such.

This goes for royal families anywhere - the British, the Norwegian, the Swedish... anything to do with the royal family soon takes on the character of something archetypal; the image of which we have seen so often and which has penetrated deep, deep down in our awareness. Whether or not you wish it so. At the same time, you have to wonder that we in the modern world can find a place for such an illogical institution as the royal family, which from any rational perspective is completely superfluous. We live in a society where on the one hand we are constantly asking if things can pay, and on the other we fork out money for something that has no function. It's as if a fairy tale has been placed in the middle of a common-sense oriented world. Ultimately, it may be that this fairy tale actually does fulfil a great necessity.

If you only wanted to work with the royal family as an archetype, why have you chosen to write a play about a royal family in which the entire family structure so closely resembles that of the Danish royal family?

Naturally, I am not going to try and claim that this is coincidence. For a long time I was just sitting there with an assortment of figures - kings and queens and princes and princesses - trying to bring them alive, but I found I couldn't use them for anything. That was how the Danish royal family came into the picture, because this royal

family reflects modern society so well. Here the Queen is the highest placed personage. She stands atop the cream cake, so to speak, so we can say that we have a matriarchy. Look around and you see that the modern woman stands as the strongest, certainly in the family and perhaps in some years also in society. And then there is the absent husband. It is no coincidence that my play begins with the death of the King, which also symbolises the death of the father figure. The role of the father is undergoing radical change these years, it is as if he is absent.. perhaps it is he who has the most difficult role, because he must fight for the right to be there. In "Det kolde hjerte" (The Cold Heart), more than anything the father is a companion to his son. The crown prince's role is so much more difficult, because he has no father or king to act as a "mirror image" and thus is denied a direct role model. I found this to be the optimal constellation, not least as the basis for the love story I also wanted to tell.

On the one hand the royal family serves as a metaphor for the whole country, and on the other you make it clear that they are not like the rest of us, in part by versifying their lines.

The royal family first becomes a royal family in relation to something else. The interesting thing about the royal family is what sets them apart from us. That they speak differently from us, that they always control themselves, that they speak about themselves as "one" rather than "I". In the metaphorical sense, they speak in verses insofar as they are encumbered by so many exterior layers; layers of things they must remember, layers of things they must not do. They carry around mask upon mask upon mask, until they reach the point where they become a "one" instead of an "I". In the play I have made the old Queen so unnaturally old precisely to emphasise the fact that we are observing an artificially created family. The royal family are artificial — as the result of a breeding process - in the sense that so much work has gone into making them something special. And with success — it almost gets to the point where it is hard to believe that they go to the toilet like the rest of us.

In the midst of this culturally civilised scenario you have introduced a Greenlander. Is Aron, as the Greenlandic Prince Consort is called, a sort of autochthonous Greenlander who symbolises unspoiled nature... or what?

Virtually all my plays feature a character from another country. Someone who is foreign. So I felt it natural to have someone of another nationality here too. Not only in order to set the Danish in perspective, but also because kings and queens almost always find their spouses abroad. I once read that the Danish Queen Margrethe supposedly said as a youngster she was concerned that no one would find her. For me, that conjures up such a touching image of the Queen, hidden away behind all the

thick walls of the castle and behind all those rituals. She was never anywhere that was accessible.

But why Greenland, exactly?

As you know, Denmark has a special relationship with Greenland — we were the former colonial power. Then one day I read a newspaper interview with a Greenlander living in Denmark and this gave me the idea of Aron. In the interview the Greenlander spoke of his childhood, of how his own parents had died and he had been placed with foster-parents, one of whom he also lost when some friends at a family get-together had held his foster-father by the legs over a river. It was only meant as fun, but by accident they dropped him. After that he moved to Denmark, where he simply went to the dogs. At some point he realised how far removed he had become from his own culture. And he decided to search for and rediscover his roots. He began wearing a white anorak, and to practice sailing a kayak and perfecting the Eskimo roll in it, because together with several other Greenlanders he was to perform before Princess Benedikte. I thought to myself, this is crazy that a Greenlander has to practice being a Greenlander in honour of royalty who have to practice being royalty. In my play, Aron is exactly like the Greenlander I read about; he plays a Greenlander more than he is a Greenlander, he exploits his ethnic space.

Sofie, the main character, is based on a girl you once saw in the streets of Copenhagen...

She was going from car to car begging for money. It was midwinter and she was only lightly dressed; she had bare legs and thin, high-heeled shoes, and was wearing a red plastic raincoat. She was a strange person who didn't fit in with the season. She had strange eyes, they were completely vacant, and she came up to me and asked if I could spare any money. I was doing some research and wanted to keep her before me a little longer, even though I was afraid of her. So I gave her twenty crowns, which genuinely moved her. She showered me with compliments and hoped that I would do well and that I would have a long life. Everything that someone should have been wishing for her. I had the feeling that I had paid Death twenty crowns. Perhaps to leave me in peace. I had a feeling that there were two people inside the figure before me: a young girl and Death.

Later you made a longer study tour of Copenhagen's red light district

My conceptions of that environment were rather abstract, so I was allowed to go with the nurse who worked at a church in the area. I was there on her last day of work before her post was terminated. The local drug addicts came to her with all their

diseases and I could observe the inner strength they actually possess. Others would have committed suicide long before they reached the point these people found themselves at, with all their physical failings. They perform a strange balancing act between preserving the last vestiges of self-respect and at the same time not being above stealing everything that can conceivably be stolen.

You seem to constantly have the urge to expose social shortcomings. Do you believe that you can change something by writing about it?

I do not believe that you can write about the times we live in without depicting both sides of society, but neither do I believe that it changes anything. At best, I can only show to others how I see things. And I have always felt that I could end up at the bottom myself, so perhaps there is also an element of preliminary study...